

On Taking Essay Examinations

I. SOME GENERAL REMARKS ABOUT ESSAY QUESTIONS:

A. In general, long essay questions are aimed at revealing your ability to make valid generalizations and support them with sound evidence, or to apply broad principles to a series of specific instances.

B. Short essay questions are more apt to be aimed at your ability to produce and present accurate explanations, backed by facts. A sample short question in a literature course might be: "In a well-organized paragraph, explain Poe's theory of poetry." In a history course you might be asked to list the major provisions of a treaty, and explain briefly the significance of each provision.

C. Many professors announce in advance the general area the exam will cover—concepts, issues, controversies, theories, rival interpretations, or whatever. But it is also important to find out what kind of essay exam the professor usually gives: Will she give a lot of short questions? Does he sometimes just give one long question? Ask her what sort of exam questions to expect.

II. PREPARING FOR AN ESSAY EXAM:

Preparing for an essay exam, as for any exam, requires close and careful re-reading and review of texts and lecture notes. But most students merely pass their eyes over the material, whereas deeper learning occurs when students actually do something with the material they are studying: for example, writing out brief paragraphs to explain concepts, or making a short outline of an answer to a question, detailing the evidence and detail which would support an answer, or formulating sample thesis sentences around which to base an essay answer.

First, ask yourself: what are the concepts and relationships involved in the material you are reviewing? Review your notes, omitting detail for the time being. Review major headings and chapter summaries in your textbooks. Adapt this approach to the course you are taking, of course.

Then, boil your material down to a rather tight outline form.

Finally, look up and list the necessary details that will flesh out the concepts.

On any essay exam—even an open-book exam—you will be facing the task of arriving at a sound generalization and then making a case for it, through the skillful use of detail, and you must therefore have the details at your

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command. But remember, not every detail is crucial. Select the details that make the best case for the concept.

(Of course part of the groundwork is mastering the terminology used in any course. Some courses, such as sociology, require you to be able to manipulate terminology. Getting this out of the way is like tying your shoelaces before you run a race. It is not glamorous or interesting, but lack of it can trip you up.)

Know the time limit for the exam. Plan to write only as much as you can in the allowed time.

III. ANSWERING AN ESSAY QUESTION:

A. Make sure you understand the question. Often essay questions are very carefully and precisely worded. You will get no credit for answering a question you haven't been asked. Yet this is probably the most common error students make: they prepare carefully, and write out a lengthy and well-organized answer, and cannot understand why they fail. They fail because they have not answered the question they were asked.

Students frequently read essay questions and focus on the content of the question, because that is what they've usually focused on in studying. They also often panic about whether they are going to be able to remember all the relevant details about that content. However, by first focusing on the content, students usually miss the point about what the question is asking you to do with the content. This is the way most errors are made on essay exams.

AN ESSAY QUESTION ALWAYS HAS A CONTROLLING IDEA EXPRESSED IN ONE OR TWO KEY WORDS. Find the key words and underline them.

Suppose you were asked, "Describe the attitudes that Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides had toward the gods." The two key words are describe, and attitude.

If you read this question and focused only on the three writers, you might be led to re-cap the plots of the plays you remember, or talk about how the gods appear in one play of each of the authors. The key, however, is first to focus on what you are being asked to do. Thus, having located the key words, you would realize that:

Description is not judgment. You have not been asked to take a position.

Your job is to state what the attitude of the three authors was, not to say whether you agree or disagree.

Attitude is not the same as relationship. If you were asked to describe your attitude toward your parents, for instance, and you replied, "We get along pretty well," you would not have answered the question: your relationship might be quite pleasant but your attitude might range from wholehearted respect to secret scorn.

B. Make sure you understand what you have been asked to do with the question. Essay questions have various requirements. You may be asked to compare, contrast, discuss, criticize, define, explain, prove, evaluate, etc. Each of these verbs has a precise meaning. See the list of "Common Key Words Used in Essay Questions."

More important, each of these key "direction" words calls for a certain technique in answering. Here, common sense is your best guide. What would you do if you were asked to contrast two methods of artificial respiration? Suppose you were asked to evaluate Pavlov's contribution to behavior therapy? Suppose you were simply asked to discuss one of the above? (This is a very common type of question.) For instance, contrasting two items involves making a preliminary analysis of similarities and differences in comparable categories, and then presenting the results in an orderly fashion, emphasizing the differences.

Evaluating means judging. You have to arrive at a judgment and then explain it with evidence. You are usually asked to evaluate something in terms of something else, as for example the following: "Evaluate the Monroe Doctrine in terms of its effect on the United States' diplomatic relationships with France."

Discussing gives you a chance to go thoroughly into the subject from several points of view, and requires careful thinking and organization.

In discussion questions you may also give your opinion. But giving your opinion does NOT mean saying whether you like or dislike, approve or disapprove of, what you are discussing. If you were asked to discuss Jonathan Swift's opinion of human nature, and you replied that you thought Gulliver's Travels was written in obscene language by a cruel and immoral man, you would deserve an F.

C. If the question seems ambiguous, vague, or too broad, make clear your interpretation of the question before attempting to answer it.

Essay questions are sometimes worded so that they may be interpreted in more than one way, or so that you must limit the question before it can be successfully answered. Sometimes the professor does this unintentionally, and sometimes intentionally. Part of your job with such questions is to limit and restate them, tactfully and clearly.

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1. An example of an unintentionally ambiguous question might be: "With what Balkan nations did the Allies fight in World War I, and under what circumstances?"

A tactful rephrasing might begin: Assuming that the question is directed to the military opposition encountered by the Allies in the Balkans, the first outbreak of hostilities occurred. . . .

2. An example of intentionally vague-seeming questions is the following from the final in Psychology 5, a course at the University of Maryland.

Discuss the factors leading to development of optimum mental health in adults. Incorporate the following: heredity, early training, family, social and economic factors, community, anxiety, etc.

The difficulties are: (a) the phrase "optimum mental health" is too broad; (b) the word "factors" can have more than one meaning; (c) the direction that asks the student to "incorporate" is vague; and (d) the particular concept and approach required have not been specified.

The instructor phrased the questions (which was worth 35 points) in this manner in order to make students seriously think about the concepts and emphases embodied in the course, rather than parrot answers. The student, however, does not know whether the instructor presented the vague question this way intentionally or not.

A tactful opening to a focused and intelligent answer is therefore needed. It might begin, "Before I discuss the development of optimum mental health in adults, I feel it necessary to define the term optimum mental health as used and limited in this course." Having defined the term, the student would become aware that the direction to "incorporate" anxiety, etc., is really a hint that she is to discuss various potent ways of achieving or maintaining optimum mental health, including some difficulties (i.e., anxiety) the mentally healthy adult may have encountered and successfully overcome.

D. Think, make notes, and prepare a rough summary statement (thesis) before you begin to write.

To write an essay, you usually work from a rough outline headed by a summary, or thesis statement. The essay is successful if you make a case to your reader of the validity of the thesis with which you started, through the use of careful illustration and example.

The most successful way to do this is to take the time to get the questions exactly in focus, make rough notes, and frame a one-sentence summary of your answer before you start filling pages.

The people all around you may seem to start filling pages before you do. Pay no attention. They may be writing bad, wordy, imprecise answers.

With your summary sentence right in front of you, write out the balance of your answer, drawing from your rough list of details and others as may occur to you as you go along. (Check your sentences against your summary statement—are you sticking to the point?)

E. Save time to go back over your answer, proofreading it carefully for spelling errors, unintentional omissions, etc.

IV. SOME THINGS NOT TO DO WHEN ANSWERING ESSAY EXAM QUESTIONS

1. Don't rush. Time spent thinking before you write is more valuable than time spent writing about thinking. A high-caliber 200-word answer is a great deal better than a rambling, disorganized incoherent 500-word answer.
2. Don't answer a question you haven't been asked. Read the directions. If you are told to answer A, B, and either C or D, you will get no extra credit for answer all four, and you may have wasted valuable time you needed on another question.
3. Don't try to "snow" your professor. If you don't know the answer, or can't think of one, don't write nervously about something else, in the hope that your instructor will give you some credit for knowing something. Nothing is easier to detect than the "snow job," and if you try it, you will get a certain dubious reputation for near-dishonesty.
4. Don't try the scattershot technique. Don't fire off all the information you have managed to accumulate, in the hope that some of it will hit the target. Just take time to know what the target is, and direct your answer to it. Instructors recognize and discount the scattershot technique, and it does not impress them. It irritates them.
5. Don't give your opinion--that is, your judgment or evaluation--unless you are asked for it. This is a common mistake, particularly when you have strong opinions. For example, consider the question, "In *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield asks a prostitute to come to his room, but then he sends her away. Why?"

Student A answers: Holden's sensitive conscience wins over his animal nature.

Comment: The writer has made a moral judgment; nobody asked her how she evaluates what Holden did. The question asks why Holden did it.

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Student B answers: Holden says, "I just didn't want to do it. I felt much more depressed than sexy, if you want to know." The girl seemed unfriendly and very young, and Holden was sorry for her.

Comment: Adequate answer, which could be strengthened by pointing to something specific in the novel that led the student to say that "the girl seemed unfriendly and very young."

6. Don't avoid words because you can't spell them. Just indicate your doubt somehow. Write (sp?) after the word you're unsure about, neatly and clearly.

(This material was adapted from How to Answer Essay Questions by Dorothy Clark, Reading and Study Skills Laboratory, University of Maryland.)